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TICKET BUYERS WOULD BE MATCHED AGAINST LAW ENFORCEMENT RECORDS

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Book a flight in the future and computers could start zipping your name through dozens of databases to see if you've recently visited a hostile country, paid for a ticket in cash or caught the attention of immigration officials or the FBI.

The goal is to track whether a travelers' past behavior -- not race or ethnicity -- fits the profile of a terrorist.

That's Rep. Mike Honda's vision for the future of air security, and the San Jose Democrat is pushing a bill to spend $15 million to start designing such a system, which could mean big business for Silicon Valley companies.

Cross-matching law enforcement records and private travel data could give authorities weeks to track down suspicious passengers or flag questionable travelers and their bags if they buy tickets the day of the flight.

``It's not profiling in the traditional terminology,'' said Honda, who sits on the House Aviation Subcommittee. ``I'm speaking of mapping people's movements and determining if they require extra scrutiny -- profiling on behavior, not on appearance, race or ethnicity.''

Honda said current requirements to screen luggage -- matching bags with passengers, hand searches or sending bags through bomb-detection machines -- don't go far enough.

``The bottom line is, how do you know the people on the flight manifest are OK, not just their bags? You have to profile,'' said Honda, who last month helped introduce legislation as part of the Bioterrorism Protection Act to begin designing a system to merge airline, Amtrak and other reservation systems with those of law enforcement agencies.

For passengers like Y.K. Gupta, the system would have started analyzing his recent travel and cross-referencing his name against FBI and local law enforcement databases the minute he bought his ticket last month from the East Coast to San Francisco. Yet, the idea of Big Brother snooping on his past so he could take a business trip didn't faze him.

``There's no secret information on me,'' said Gupta, a software company employee from New Jersey. ``As long as they require everyone to be doubly checked.''

But civil liberties advocates say passengers shouldn't be so relaxed about such a profiling system.

``You're talking about turning airline check-in counters into law enforcement checkpoints,'' said Jayashri Srikantiah, a San Francisco lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union who has been fighting a facial-recognition pilot program at the Fresno airport, which screens passengers' faces against those of known terrorists. ``It's unclear if this database would stop terrorists, but it most definitely would limit the freedom of every American who travels.''

Details unclear

Honda spokesman Ernest Baynard said it's still unclear exactly how the system would work, or even what would happen to a passenger who sets off alarms in the system.

``Certainly, this idea is going to have to be developed more,'' Baynard said. ``It would be a massive undertaking from an IT perspective, and there's the potential for this to be very controversial. Extremely high security standards will need to be met with regards to personal information.''

Still, the ACLU's Srikantiah warned that errors are inevitable. ``I can see passengers mistakenly getting selected and delayed all the time.'' Even if it's 98 percent correct, that means a lot of passengers would be falsely stopped, she said. ``Law enforcement databases are notoriously riddled with errors.''

What's more, she added, the database presents a slippery slope. ``There's no apparent end to it. What if someone is wanted for a crime or questioning unrelated to terrorism? Are they not going to use it if they find someone'' like that?

Bigger problems, though, could be prevented, Baynard said.

``Obviously, we don't want a reservation agent at Travelocity.com or Amtrak running background checks on whatever passengers they want,'' Baynard said. ``But if there's a red flag out there on someone, this system would find it. . . . The question will be striking a balance between security and civil liberties.''

Congressional staffers said it's too early to predict the fate of such a profiling system, but Honda has had success securing technology funding in anti-terrorism bills in recent months as a member of the House Democratic Task Force on Homeland Security.

In November, Honda pushed through a $20 million provision in the Aviation Transportation Security Act allowing for 20 U.S. airports to soon test new and emergency security technology.

Honda's proposed profiling system would be a sweeping extension of the computer-assisted passenger pre-screening system, better known as CAPPS, which airlines already use to help single out high-threat passengers.

Race-blind system

CAPPS, which began in 1994, is supposed to be blind to race or ethnicity by singling out passengers who buy one-way tickets, pay in cash or meet other confidential criteria. That system doesn't screen passengers for any criminal background. Critics have argued that the CAPPS system is discriminatory because poor people may pay for tickets with cash.

CAPPS did flag two of the Sept. 11 hijackers who boarded American Airlines Flight 77 that later

crashed into the Pentagon, airline officials say. They reserved their tickets with a credit card, but later paid in cash.

Airport officials searched both of their carry-ons. And even though the hijackers reportedly used box cutters, any blade smaller than four inches was a legal carry-on item at the time.

The new profiling system would probably also require passengers flagged by the system to face hand searches of their luggage. But law enforcement officials would not speculate on what other techniques they may use to screen such passengers before allowing them on planes.

Representatives from more than 50 Silicon Valley companies, from Oracle on down to start-ups, have met with Honda since Sept. 11 to brainstorm ways to use technology on a variety of homeland security fronts.

Companies such as Aspect Telecommunications, of San Jose, which provides products and services for call center operations, have been working closely with Honda's office to promote a profiling system and want a chance to help design it.

``There were certain patterns'' about the Sept. 11 terrorists, said David Puglia, senior vice president of Aspect Telecommunications Corp., of San Jose. ``If given to the right agencies at the right time -- in real time -- it may have prevented this whole thing.''

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